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When an ELL Has Difficulty Learning, Is the Problem a Disability or the Second-Language Acquisition Process?

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One of the questions that I have most often been asked during my years as a bilingual/ESL teacher educator is how to distinguish between academic difficulties caused by a language or learning disability and academic difficulties caused by lack of proficiency in a second language.

I first grappled with this question early in my career as a third- and fourth-grade bilingual teacher when a child named Ana began her third-grade year in my classroom. She had attended an ESL program in a different district in second grade and a rural school in Puerto Rico in first grade. She could speak fluently in English, although she had a Spanish accent and her speech reflected unacquired grammatical structures and lack of vocabulary. She was virtually a nonreader in both Spanish and English, but that could be explained by her educational history. Since she had already been exposed to reading in Spanish and English, I decided to provide intensive reading instruction in both languages, separated by time of day. By the end of the year, Ana had progressed in English through the pre-primer and primer levels, but had made virtually no progress in Spanish.

When Ana returned for her fourth-grade year, I decided to focus exclusively on English reading. She continued to progress, but at a very slow rate, and I began to wonder about the reasons for this. Were her difficulties in reading due to a learning disability or to lack of proficiency in English? Because there are similarities in behaviors, this question can be a very difficult one to answer. She had articulation problems in reading and speaking English; were they due to a language disorder or to a Spanish accent? She had difficulty processing phonological information; was this a processing problem or a lack of familiarity with the sound system of English? She had trouble remembering vocabulary words; was this poor memory or lack of experience with the English language?

When I discussed Ana's case with colleagues, they all urged me to refer her to special education. They said it didn't matter what the cause of her problem was; with a special education referral she would get more help. But would it be the kind of help she needed? My colleagues argued that as long as students got some kind of additional help, it didn't matter what kind of help it was, or where it came from. I wasn't sure.

The problem is that the kind of support given to students with reading or language disabilities is not the kind of support that second-language learners need. A learning disability has an internal cause; it will not cure itself with time. Students with learning disabilities need to be taught compensatory strategies to help overcome the disability. Lack of second-language proficiency has an external cause; with time and appropriate support, it will cure itself. ELLs need large amounts of meaningful exposure to academic language, in interactive situations, with appropriate scaffolding to help them complete tasks that they can't yet complete by themselves. I was afraid that Ana would not get this kind of support in a special education class, where the traditional focus on incremental mastery of discrete sequential skills could prevent her from having to grapple with authentic problem solving using meaningful academic language.

In addition, I was concerned that if Ana were referred to special education, she would be labeled and come to view herself as being stupid or having a disability. She would probably remain in

special education for the rest of her school career and might never attain her academic potential. In a paper that addresses the issue of overrepresentation of ELLs in special education, Clara Lee Brown claims that "erroneous placement in special education deprives [culturally and linguistically diverse students] of an enriching and challenging curriculum" [1, p. 227]. They are then tracked into low-ability programs, often drop out of school, and may spend the rest of their lives in low-paying jobs.

The question of overrepresentation of ELLs in special education classes has been an issue since the 1920s, when newly arrived Mexican immigrants in California were given IQ tests in English and placed into classes for the mentally retarded on the basis of their test scores. A lot has changed since then, and nondiscriminatory testing and classification have been part of federal law since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) was passed in 1975. However, the fact that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 require states to collect and examine data on overrepresentation of minorities in special education shows that it is still a problem.

At the same time, the opposite problem also exists. ELLs who really do have learning disabilities often do not receive the services they need. Their problems may be unrecognized because they are second-language learners. Or they may be referred to special education but not receive appropriate services because of a lack of bilingual special education teachers.

Distinguishing between incomplete second-language acquisition and a learning disability is a difficult task. From a list of six language processing deficits that can be present in learning-disabled students [2], four of them could be attributed to the second-language learning process: lack of attention, difficulty interpreting verbal messages, difficulty retrieving stored information, and difficulty sequencing and organizing information. The only way a language disability can reliably be distinguished from second-language acquisition is to do a complete assessment in both languages. If problems are apparent only in the second language, it is probably a language acquisition issue; if they are present in both languages, it is a language disability. This solution, however, is not possible with children such as Ana who never acquired a solid foundation of language skills in their native language.

I never did figure out the cause of Ana's reading problems. As her fourth-grade year went on and her progress in reading remained slow, I had to decide whether to retain her in fourth grade, send her on to middle school, where she would get much less classroom support than she got in my self-contained classroom, or refer her to special education. I discussed my concerns with a special education teacher, who agreed to come to my classroom to observe Ana. After watching her in small-group English reading instruction, this teacher informed me that Ana was obviously very low functioning and that there was no point in going through a special education referral because she likely had such a low IQ that she would never be able to perform well academically, even with special education services.

This blanket diagnosis, based on a very short observation, no interaction, and no assessment, made me so angry that I decided I wanted nothing to do with the special education program in that district. Ana went on to middle school the following year, reading three years below grade level in English, but unlabeled.

I have since learned that the only way to get fair treatment for ELLs in cases like this is to become an advocate for them. As part of his framework for "Empowering Minority Students" [3], Jim Cummins recommends an advocacy-oriented approach to assessment, which evaluates the entire "societal and educational context within which the child has developed," rather than just testing the child "to locate the 'problem' or 'disability'" (p. 30). The only ways to distinguish a learning disability from lack of proficiency in a second language is through unbiased, thorough assessment in both languages or through alternative assessments when native language assessment is not possible or would not yield valid results. Teachers of ELLs have to demand such assessments and monitor the process from beginning to end.

There are many good sources of information about how to advocate for ELLs who are being considered for special education referral. An ERIC Digest dealing with the overrepresentation issue

claims that "placement in special education classes may be a form of discrimination" [4, p. 1] and describes important stages in the advocacy process: promoting family involvement, making the general education classroom conducive to success for all children, increasing the accuracy of referral and evaluation, providing appropriate special education services, and monitoring the provision of services. Clara Lee Brown coined the term SLAAP (second language acquisition-associated phenomena) to describe the "wide range of low to extremely low language performance that is displayed by [culturally and linguistically diverse] students in the process of acquiring English as a second language (ESL), but that could be falsely identified as language disabilities" [1, p. 227]. She describes what can be done at the classroom, school, and state levels to reduce over-referrals of these children to special education, and recommends alternative assessment measures.

I don't know what happened to Ana. I wish I had done more for her. And I hope that we have progressed enough since then so that all teachers of ELLs can be the kind of advocate I should have been for Ana.

[1] Brown, C. L. (2004). "Reducing the Over-Referral of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students (CLD) for Language Disabilities." *NABE Journal of Research and Practice* 2 (1): 225-43. http://www.coursecrafters.com/ELL-Outlook/2004/mar_apr/

[2] Levine, M. (1992). *Developmental Variations and Learning Disorders*. Cambridge, MA: Educators Publishing Service. Cited in Root, C. (1994). "A Guide to Learning Disabilities for the ESL Classroom Practitioner." *TESL-EJ* 1(1): A-4. <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej01/a.4.html%20>

[3] Cummins, J. (1986). "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention." *Harvard Education Review* 15: 18-36.

[4] Burnette, J. (1998). *Reducing the Disproportionate Representation of Minority Students in Special Education* (ERIC/OSEP Digest #E566). Arlington, VA: The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. <http://ericec.org/digests/e566.html>

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